Julije KEMENJ

TIME PASSES, PEOPLE VANISH

Julije Kemenj was born in 1927 in Kikinda, to father Arnold Kemenj and mother Etelka, née Haas. He is a chemical engineer by occupation. He began studying in Belgrade and completed his education in Haifa. He worked in Israel for two years and then in Germany until his retirement. He is married to Vera, née Fuhr. He lives in Frankfurt.

My paternal grandfather, Samuel Kohn was a poor villager, a crop farmer in the tiny village of Kvasovo in Moravia which, even today does not have a population of more than three or four hundred people. He and my grandmother Julija, after whom I was named, had five children: three sons and two daughters. The sons were my father Arnold, Ignac and Ede, and the daughters Melita and Irma. Grandfather Samuel was born in 1855 and Grandmother Julija, née Politzer, in 1862. On of my grandmother's cousins went to America and became a famous publisher; the Pulitzer Prize awarded to the best journalists today bears his name. This poor, crop-farming family did everything in its power to make it possible for their sons go move big cities, to Vienna or Budapest, to study. They married both daughters, with small dowries, in Pest and Bratislava, all part of their effort to send the children to big cities. In order to be admitted into higher education more easily, the boys adopted a Hungarian surname, changing from Kohn to Kemenj. In Vienna, Arnold completed commercial academy, while Ignac became a mechanical

engineer in Budapest and later worked on Hungarian railways, while Ede became a veterinary surgeon in Budapest. This was all happening at the turn of the twentieth century. The language spoken in my grandfather's family was German but the children, who went to Budapest to study, learnt Hungarian.

The situation of my maternal grandfather, Dr Jakob Haas, born in 1858, was quite different. He married my grandmother, Emilia Herzka, who was born in 1866. They lived in Puhovo above the Váh river, somewhere along the border between Moravia and Slovakia. Grandfather Jakob was among the first Jews in this part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to complete their education and become successful and wealthy doctors. They had three daughters, Irena, my mother Etelka, and Melanija, and a son, Artur, who became a lawyer in Budapest. They married their daughters with good dowries to hard-working young men. This family also spoke only German at home, while the children who spread out into the world learnt Hungarian, Slovakian, Serbian and so on.

My parents, who had been in their new surroundings for just a few weeks, were in Kikinda for the beginning of the first world war. My father was immediately mobilised as an officer in the Austro-Hungarian Army. His brothers in Budapest went straight to the front. Mother stayed in Kikinda, awaiting the birth of their first child, a son who would come into the world in 1915 and be named Aleksandar. My father was on the Italian front at the Soča river, where he was wounded several times but, after four years of fighting, he returned with the rank of captain in an army which no longer existed, to a home, Kikinda, in a country which had been Austria-Hungary when he left and was now a new state – the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.

My parents began a new life, learning a new language, communicating in Hungarian, Serbian and German. Father opened a shop for agricultural machinery which was to be successful on the rich Banat plain. Developing his business and profession, my father was among the first in Vojvodina to introduce mechanisation and automation to agriculture.

In the meantime, in 1920, a second child was born, a son, Paja, while the first, Aleksandar, died of scarlet fever in 1921. Seven years later, in 1927, I came into this world. The serious crisis of 1929 affected my parents as it affected everyone else. Father wrote off the debts of

many farmers and almost reached the brink of bankruptcy. He died suddenly on March 3, 1938.

Following the unexpected death of my father, my mother took over managing the business. Seeing the war coming, she tried to build up the stock of machinery and valuable items. Just before the beginning of the war in Yugoslavia, in December 1940, my mother married a Serb, Dragomir Gašić.

Sunday, April 6, 1941. We turned on the radio in the morning and heard the news that Belgrade was being bombed, that war had begun with no declaration. My brother Paja, who had come home from his job at a textile factory in Novi Sad to spend Sunday with us, got on his motorcycle and left immediately for Novi Sad to report to the army there. This was the last time we saw him. He did reach Novi Sad, but in the general chaos did not manage to be accepted into the army, through which as a prisoner of war he might have been saved.

We watched the German Army calmly enter Kikinda on April 14 and 15 and march through the town welcomed noisily by our neighbours who were suddenly dressed in black uniforms. We did not understand the meaning of this. A group of officers immediately moved into our house. While their army cook was emptying our storage and basement, scrambling thirty or forty eggs at a time, he told us: "Run as fast and as far as you can, because these people will be the death of you!" At that moment we did not understand.

The terrible truth was soon confirmed. The following morning officers burst in, followed by the local fifth columnists, and took our furniture away in trucks along with anything else they could get their hands on. They were also looking for hidden weapons. We didn't have any. However Mother remembered that Father had brought his old revolver with him when he returned from the first world war. Fortunately the Germans didn't find it, but when we found it, hidden among some old linen in a cupboard, we immediately threw it into the septic tank. My stepfather, Dragomir Gašić, was taken to prison as a Chetnik. For a couple of days they beat him. He was tortured together with a Jew, Bela Štajner, who once before the war, in the Lloyd Club, where they played cards, had said that he would give a million dinars to anyone who killed Hitler. The Germans did not forgive him for this.

In the days following their arrival, the Germans took me to the *curia*, the court. There they immediately locked people up, but I was lucky because there was a wagon full of potatoes that had to be peeled.

Compared to the work we would do later this was a good job. Soon all Jewish men and women, regardless of their age, with or without fur coats, would have to march, in the morning, to barracks about three or four kilometres away where, using their bare hands, they would be carrying horse manure from stables to a dump and then further on to another dump. As a child, among a group of other children, I was ordered to clean the barracks toilets. Because of the unpleasant smell, the Germans didn't like to go there so we were able to relax a little more.

Having partly recovered from the beating, my stepfather Dragomir was taken to the first execution site. The Germans killed five local people, saying it was a showdown with the communists. Dragomir returned beside himself. They had killed people before his very eyes and he had to dig graves and bury the victims with his bare hands. After this they locked him up and beat him as a Chetnik. After he was again released from prison we carried him to the sanatorium. Because they had hinted that he would soon be beaten again, he fled at night and managed to reach Belgrade.

Because they were bursting into our house every day and taking away everything they could and because we, through the Jewish Community, were paying enormous contributions, we soon realised that this filthy job at the barracks was quite nice work compared to all our other problems. In our minds we kept repeating the warning given to us by that German soldier in the first days of the occupation.

One day in the summer of 1941, we received an order: we were to go to the synagogue, with whatever few things we could carry. We soon realised that we were not alone there but that all our fellow-Jews from the place were also there. There was also a crowd of *Volksdeutchen*, all quite well known to us, who began looking for gold and other valuables on us. They whipped and beat people bloody, especially women. There was shouting and crying, wailing coming from the synagogue. Late at night all these extremely exhausted and tortured people were ordered to start walking to the railway station, about three or four kilometres away, where they were pushed into freight cars. Almost none of our fellow-citizens even noticed this sad procession as it passed through the dark streets of Kikinda.

We stood in closed wagons, because there was no space to sit. When the train finally set off we were thinking aloud, wondering where we were going and when we would get there. However the train

stopped. They rushed us out of it. Another procession. It's still night. At the station we read that we had arrived in Novi Bečej.

The sad procession moved through the village and eventually we arrived at an abandoned mill. We went in, exhausted, and tried to arrange ourselves on the old wooden boards, so that we would have somewhere to sleep. It was summer. We had no covers. The mill was guarded by an old soldier, probably one of the local Germans, and he allowed people to go out freely and shop in the market. It was also possible to order food from the village taverns, for those who had any money left of course. The children played in the spacious mill yard. Because it was warm, the elderly would sit outdoors, warming themselves up for the night. There were also people among us who were sick, and even crazy. I remember one poor, demented man, Dr Iric, who kept shouting all the time "*Gandi a majom*" (Gandhi is a monkey), which had the children laughing and the adults wondering what would happen the next day. One day, from the other side of the Tisa river, from Bačka where the Hungarians were in power, we heard people calling to us. We went to the Tisa. My brother was across the water, in Stari Bečej. That was the last time I saw my brother. In December 1944, the Nyilas stripped him in the street and, having established that he was a Jew, killed him on the spot. We communicated by shouting.

And that was how it was, day after day. People were discussing ways out of this grave situation. Among other things, there was talk that partners in mixed marriages would be released, which was what happened. Mother thought that perhaps the same thing would happen to her. But then, what would happen to me?

A few weeks later, my stepfather Dragomir came, bringing a note from the Gestapo in Belgrade authorising the release from camp of his wife, my mother, together with their four-year-old son Đorđe - that was supposed to be me. How did he manage to get this note? He went to the Gestapo, cried and begged: "My Etelka, my Etelka, release her!" He got his famous note. It was later that we understood the way in which – at least for the time being – we had been saved. He added a "1" to the note, I became a 14-year-old, which I actually was. The procedure was very simple. We emerged from the mill into freedom and headed for the station, then left for Belgrade by train. A few days after our departure, the other mill "residents" were also taken to Belgrade on barges.

Dragomir's brother Dragi, who lived with his family in a gypsy tent in the shanty town in Franše d'Epera Street, was waiting for us. It

was narrow and filthy, but we were alive and warmly welcomed. We soon became familiar with life in the presence of bedbugs, lice and similar creatures. The other "advantage" of life in Belgrade was hunger. Neither we nor our hosts had any money for food, of which there was less and less. We got some stamps – I didn't, of course, because I did not have papers – and with these it was possible to buy from the shops some stiff plum jam, which was sold by the piece a few grams at a time. We were near the Topovske Šupe camp and we knew that the men from Banat were there. I was near the gate every day. I saw women from the town who were still free bringing food and warm things for their husbands and sons. I had neither anyone to take things to nor anything to take. However, I waved when I recognised somebody. A few days later I saw that they were loading people into trucks and taking them away. They were waving to me. They learnt immediately, and we learnt later, that this journey was taking them straight to their death.

Julije Kemenj (back row, second from L) and friends, 1943

They soon called up all the Jewish women and children who were scattered around the city staying with friends to come to Đorđe Vašingtona Street, from where they were taken to the Sajmište camp across the Sava Bridge.

At the end of 1941, the Germans, having entered the Soviet Union, were approaching Moscow. This only increased the pessimistic mood and people lost hope that things would ever get better. The winter was harsh so that women and children in the Sajmište camp were dying with no direct involvement of their torturers. Those still alive were killed in a *dušegupka*, a truck in which they suffocated them with the exhaust gases.

In the winter we had the opportunity to "live" in the laundry of a building with good people in Gornjačka Street, near the football stadium. There, hungry and freezing, we survived a harsh winter. Dragomir found work as a sanitation worker, actually a pest exterminator. I was allowed to go with him carrying the buckets with cyanide and acids, and cans of Zyklon. After the war we learnt that the Germans used this gas to kill Jews. I worked sealing windows, holes and doors in apartments before this poisonous gas was released to eliminate bedbugs. Later I would open the apartments and air them out. I would be given tips and, more importantly, a little food. One day the company we worked for was given orders to clean some rooms in the Gestapo headquarters of bedbugs. None of the adult workers dared go there, so they sent me. Of course I couldn't say no. I took the buckets with the poisons, walked past the SS guard and worked for a couple of hours sealing and preparing. While standing on a ladder I was talking to SS officers who wanted to know how I spoke such good German. I told them that it was taught in schools. Time went by and millions were killed and died.

I learnt that the Pajić family, parents of my close school friend, had managed to move from Kikinda to Belgrade, as Serbs, and that they had a house at 2 Vojvode Anđelke Street, close to Đeram. We got in touch. Aca and Seka, the son and daughter, gave me a warm, friendly hand and their parents did all in their power to make my life easier. I was living in a constant state of hunger, and they shared their food with me. They had a German officer in the apartment and introduced me to him as their son, as they also did when police patrols arrived.

With Aca, who was going to secondary school, I learnt school material at home. We would read together and study English. I met his school friends and became very close to them. These were Serbs and they soon learnt that I was Jewish, but not one of them said a word about it during the war. Ordinary words cannot express my gratitude to the Pejić family and to those friends. Nor is it possible to forget this way in which those war days were made easier. I tried to express my grati-

tude, at least to some extent, by planting an olive tree in the Forest of the Righteous in Jerusalem, a tree of gratitude in Yad Vashem.

My stepfather, Dragomir, is certainly the one who saved my life in the beginning, but we often had big problems with him because of his drinking. He would come in late, after the curfew, so we would never know whether he had been arrested. He would always bring some German with him, a soldier from the last tavern, also drunk of course, and tell them that his wife was Jewish. Of course, in their state of drunkenness, they didn't take this seriously. Some of these Germans, who understood who we were, later came sober and brought us bread in the times of the worst hunger. After the war I looked for these Germans, who had given us their addresses, but they had not survived the war.

I was living illegally. That meant that I didn't have documents, so just about any patrol could have taken me to Banjica, to death. I knew how to recognise patrols from the distance so, because I knew which houses had double entrances, I would hide. After Dragomir arrived in Belgrade, he managed to get refugee documents, because his birthplace was Travnik. I also managed, early on, to get refugee papers in the name of Đorđe Gašić, but I was unable to extend it in 1942. The old refugee card sometimes helped me: at the refugee kitchen I would get a ration of beans with cabbage or a ration of cabbage with beans.

The people I socialised with, the friends who would save me during police raids, were more or less supporters of Draža Mihajlović and, at the time, it was believed that with the assistance of the Western forces he would bring freedom to the nation. Sometime in mid-1942, we ran into some acquaintances from Kikinda, the Palinkasev family, who offered us an opportunity to live with them, in their kitchen at 12 Vladetina Street. I remember once when they returned from the countryside they brought us a bag of beans which fed us for a couple of days. Their son was a doctor and he gave me medical attention when I needed it. A little later we got a two-room apartment with tinsmith Antonije Anđelić at 5 Kraljice Marije Street (later renamed March 27 Street). There I was hidden in a shed. A multi-story building has been built there, however my coal shed, my wartime hideout, is still there in the yard.

Time passed in an atmosphere of uncertainty, in hunger and privation. But following Stalingrad, we began to hope that we were near the end. Easter 1944. Blue skies. We heard the thunder of aircraft and anti-aircraft artillery. We saw many planes above us, bombs were already

falling on Belgrade. Panic spread in Palilula. People were fleeing in all directions, leaving the city, carrying various things with them.

We also fled. We went to some people we didn't know well in Mali Mokri Lug, where we survived in tents. The next bombing came exactly in the area where we had found shelter. We survived that too. There were many dead. We helped friends dig some of their things up from under the rubble of buildings hit by bombs. Again we returned to 5 Kraljice Marije Street, which was more or less in the city centre.

After June 6, 1944, when the Americans opened the western front, we realised that there would not be a Balkan front. The Germans from the south passed through Belgrade and withdrew across the Sava Bridge. We knew that a wounded animal was very dangerous so we were even more careful and paid close attention to what was happening around us. In those days the situation in Belgrade had improved to such an extent that, after three years, there were again bakeries in which bread could be bought. The news from London was that the front was definitely and rapidly approaching us. The Red Army crossed Romania. Artillery fire could be heard in the distance. We hid in the basement of a house where friends lived. This villa in Đorđe Vašingtona Street is now divided into private apartments. The sound of shooting was becoming stronger from the direction of Eastern Serbia and Banat. On the morning of October 15, at the intersection outside our apartment, we saw Germans ready for battle.

The gunfire was getting louder and louder. Suddenly shouting was heard and the sound of heavy machinery. Russian tanks, coming from the direction of the Danube, covered with people and flags. Although it was extremely dangerous, we climbed out of the basement and ran towards the corner were we saw lying dead the Germans who had been putting up some kind of resistance that morning. We realised what the noise was. The Russian tanks passed by, continuing on towards the Belgrade University Engineering Faculty.

Like a dream it came, something we had hoped for through all the years of Hitlerism, uncertainty, constant mortal danger and hunger, something out of a dream: Liberation. This was something that in that moment we were unable to take in. After so many years of horror and humiliation, a man was suddenly a man again, equal and free.

The Russian command came into the yard of our "villa" with trucks full of milk, cheese and other food we had not seen for years. We were given cans and half a litre each of strangely transparent milk. It

turned out to be vodka. Every morning, before going into battle, the warriors were given this "milk" ration. A small number of them returned in the evening. There were battles fought around the Sava Bridge. Beside the Engineering Faculty we saw a mass of burnt-out German armoured cars and soldiers.

Julije Kemenj with the Pejić couple in the Forest of the Righteous in Jerusalem, beside a tree in Yad Vashem, planted in gratitude for all that that was done for him in the difficult war years

The city was liberated on October 20. Alongside the Russians we also saw unevenly trained fighters and children. These were the first Partisans. They took over the political leadership of the city. One of the first things they did was to call on the young people of Belgrade, those born in 1926 and earlier, to join Partisan units. A large number of them, untrained and unprepared for war against a strong enemy, were to perish on the Srem front.

At the Palilula police – the police were known as militia at this time – and not only there, they were arresting people and taking them to

execution sites, from which they would disappear. Among the first to be arrested was our Dragomir, accused of being a collaborator because people had often seen him with the Germans, leaving some tavern, of course, dead drunk. After much begging, skill and weeping, we managed to get him out and save him from almost certain death. Because we had no papers it was very difficult for us to prove who and what we were. Finally we succeeded and, two or three weeks later, we received permission to return to our home town, which was still called Kikinda.

We returned to find our house completely plundered. A German commissioner had lived there until a day before the liberation on October 5. On a heap of old papers we found, as a greeting to those returning, a book entitled *Schuss im leeren Haus* (A shot in an empty house)!

As I was born in 1927, I wasn't required to join the Partisans, so I continued to study. At the same time I was an observer from the top of a building in the city and reported on enemy planes passing nearby. I also took meteorological notes. We had great difficulty getting back some of our furniture which was in various warehouses and youth homes. Russian officers in transit through the city were accommodated in the house. We were permitted to live in two rooms of our house.

Over the next two years, at courses for students whose education had been interrupted by the war, I managed to finish secondary school and matriculated in 1947. I came to realise that this new political system was not for me. I had no intention of joining the government party. They even called me a reactionary. But because I had suffered during the war and was opposed to Hitler, they did not arrest me.

In 1947 I managed to enrol to study technology in the Faculty of Engineering. The political situation was very unstable and soon came the split between Tito and Stalin. After the British left the Near East, there were battles being fought there between the Zionists and the Arabs. Tito allowed a handful of Jews who had survived to emigrate to the new state which had been established.

At the end of my fourth semester I received permission to emigrate. At the beginning of July 1949, before boarding the Radnik in Rijeka, we were forced to sign a statement turning all our real estate over to the state and relinquishing our citizenship. A few days later we arrived in Israel.